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Operational activities for development: economic and technical cooperation among developing countries

Raising public awareness of and support for South-South cooperation

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 57/263, in which the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to carry out a study through coordination of the Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries of the United Nations Development Programme, and to submit to its at its fifty-eighth session, findings with concrete proposals to promote and facilitate South-South cooperation and to raise public awareness on the importance and contribution of South-South cooperation with respect to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the United Nations Millennium Declaration. The report was also to highlight the value added and implications of the proposed international decade on South-South cooperation and the United Nations day for South-South cooperation.

The report finds that international decades declared by the General Assembly have helped to focus international attention of policy makers at the national, regional and international levels on issues of economic, social and political importance. The report concludes that the proposed United Nations day for South-South cooperation and/or an international decade for South-South cooperation would, on a South-South basis, present new opportunities to effectively mobilize the increasing human and financial resources in the South towards the objective of meeting internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration.

* A/58/150.

** The submission of the present report was delayed in order to allow sufficient time for the clearing departments to review and approve it.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 57/263 of 20 December 2002, by which the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General, through coordination of the Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and in consultation with Member States and relevant organizations and agencies, to carry out a study with a view to promoting public awareness of the importance and contribution of South-South and triangular cooperation with respect to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the United Nations Millennium Declaration and, in that context, to make concrete proposals to promote and facilitate South-South cooperation and to raise such public awareness, inter alia, on the value added and implications of the proposed international decade on South-South cooperation and the United Nations day for South-South cooperation and to submit the findings of the study to the General Assembly at its fifty-eighth session.

2. The report considers how an international decade and a United Nations day could promote and facilitate South-South cooperation in realizing internationally agreed development goals, especially those set out in the Millennium Declaration. It takes into account Economic and Social Council resolutions 1980/67 of 25 July 1980 on international years and anniversaries, and 1989/84 of 24 May 1989, on guidelines for international decades on economic and social fields. In those resolutions, the Council recognized the contribution that such observances could make to the promotion of international cooperation and understanding and set out relevant criteria and guidelines.

II. Review of experience

3. Since its founding, the United Nations has declared days, weeks, years and decades for the purpose of focusing world attention on issues in which the Organization has interest and commitment. Generally, the United Nations calls upon Member States and other organizations to mark such days, weeks or decades in ways that reflect their interest and priorities.

4. With regard to decades, the broadest in scope have been the United Nations Development Decades, the first of which was declared in the 1960s. Successive decades have been declared on ending colonialism, promoting disarmament, combating racism and racial discrimination and on the industrial development of Africa. The 1970s saw the declaration of decades on ocean exploration, women and transport and communications in Africa. In the 1980s, the General Assembly declared decades to mobilize international action on drinking water supply and sanitation, disabled persons, drug abuse and cultural development. In the 1990s, decades were declared on natural disaster reduction, indigenous people, human rights education and eradication of poverty. Since the turn of the century, international decades have been declared on combating malaria, promoting a culture of peace and non-violence for the children of the world, literacy and education for all and sustainable development.

5. The Economic and Social Council Guidelines for international decades in economic and social fields stipulate that the subject should:

(a) Be consistent with the purposes and principles of the United Nations;

(b) Be of priority concern in the political, economic, social, cultural, humanitarian or human rights fields;

(c) Require long-term action at the international or regional level and at the national level;

(d) Be expected to produce results, which would not otherwise be achieved;

(e) Be initiated only if the United Nations system has the substantive, administrative and financial capacity to play an effective role in implementation;

(f) Be presented along with a draft programme of action containing well-defined objectives and activities, leading to clearly identifiable results, and providing for the establishment of national committees or other mechanisms for the purpose of mobilizing public support and carrying out activities connected with the decade.

6. The declaration of United Nations days, of which there are now over 60, has tended to follow custom in the absence of explicit guidelines from intergovernmental bodies. International days declared by the General Assembly cover a wide range of topics, but their general intent is to focus attention and action on important issues. International days are usually timed to commemorate a significant event in history. For example, United Nations Day (24 October) recalls the coming into force of the Charter of the United Nations and World Environment Day (5 June) recalls the opening day of the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972. However, not all international days mark events in United Nations history: the International Day of Cooperatives is observed on the first Saturday in July to mark the 1995 centenary of the International Cooperative Alliance, an umbrella group of organizations comprising some 760 million members in 100 countries. The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (17 October), declared in 1992, gave the imprimatur of the United Nations to an observance initiated by non-governmental organizations.

7. United Nations days and international decades declared by the General Assembly have attracted increased attention by the public, policy makers and analysts to their subjects. In most cases, there have also been increased activities at the national and regional levels, often with civil society playing a key role. While deep-seated economic, social and political problems have not been solved because of international decades or days, they have undoubtedly received added attention, especially from policy makers at the national, regional and international levels.

8. For example, since 16 December 1977, when the General Assembly adopted resolution 32/142 proclaiming International Women's Day, considerable progress has been made for women in developed and developing countries alike. The United Nations Association of Canada reports that, in many countries, provisions guaranteeing the enjoyment of human rights without discrimination on the basis of gender have been included in constitutions; legal literacy and other measures have been introduced to alert women to their rights and to ensure their access to those rights; the world community has identified violence against women as a clear violation of women's rights; and incorporation of gender perspectives into regular

programmes and policies has become a priority at the United Nations and in many States. It is recognized that much remains to be done in order for women to achieve full equality with men, but women's voices are being heard. International Women's Day (8 March) provides an opportunity to pay tribute to the achievement of women and to highlight the needs and concerns of women on national, regional and global agendas.

9. World Press Freedom Day (3 May), established by the General Assembly in December 1993 (decision 48/432), serves as an occasion to inform the public of violations of the right to the freedom of expression and as a reminder that many journalists risk death or jail to bring the daily news to their readers. It is a day to assess the state of press freedom worldwide, and among other things, a day to remind Governments to respect their commitments to freedom of the press.

10. Universal Children's Day, the observance date of which varies from country to country, was declared by the General Assembly in 1989 in order to promote children's welfare. The Day provides an occasion to remember that children need love and respect to grow to their full potential.

11. Likewise, the international decades focused on disabled persons, drinking water and sanitation and natural disaster prevention have been credited with important initiatives to map problems and significant activities to promote the acceptance of new attitudes, norms and standards.

12. Experience shows that declaring an international decade offers opportunities to mobilize international efforts towards an important objective, while establishing goals and targets to be met over a specified period of time. The advantage of declaring a United Nations day is that it annually draws the attention of the international community to a specific issue for unlimited period of time.

III. Rationale for a United Nations day and/or an international decade for South-South cooperation

13. There are three main reasons for the General Assembly to consider declaring a United Nations day and/or an international decade for South-South cooperation, the first being the need to consolidate the South-South agenda. Since the adoption, in 1978, of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action for Promoting and Implementing Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries,[1] the agenda for South-South cooperation has grown enormously. This has been reflected both in the proliferation of declarations and plans of action relevant to South-South cooperation and in the growing diversity and scope of efforts to use that modality. The emergence of a host of common challenges has contributed to this process. They include environmental pollution, drugs and arms trafficking, money-laundering, volatility of currency exchange rates, international debt, the need to ensure the safety of the international food trade, control of communicable diseases, trade negotiations of unprecedented scope and armed conflicts that have drained resources from development.

14. The capacity of developing countries to deal with this wide range of problems has also grown: a number of developing countries with advanced technological capabilities have emerged as hubs of South-South cooperation and their activities have become extremely diversified, ranging from agricultural extension work to space-based communications and cutting-edge biotechnologies. The number and

variety of stakeholders in South-South cooperation have also diversified and grown rapidly in recent years, with private sector and civil society organizations playing increasingly important roles. The post-cold-war move towards greater reliance on market forces has spawned a large number of initiatives aimed at regional economic integration, at shaping common standards and at creating mechanisms for cooperation. Within the United Nations system, the numerous examples of cost-efficiency resulting from South-South cooperation have made the modality increasingly important. The Economic and Social Council, in resolution 1992/41 of 30 July 1992, called upon all parties in the development effort to make concerted, planned and vigorous endeavours to benefit from utilization of the capacities of developing countries. It called upon all agencies in the United Nations system to give it first consideration in their programmes of technical assistance. Recent international forums, including the South Summit, held in Havana, the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, held in Brussels, the International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey, Mexico, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, have all highlighted the importance of South-South cooperation.

15. A second major reason for declaring a United Nations day and/or an international decade on South-South cooperation is the urgent need to meet the challenge that globalization has posed to the economic and social development of many developing countries. In the third year after the Millennium Summit adopted a set of developmental goals to be achieved by 2015, it is clear that a number of countries are not on track to meet them. Most of those countries face deep-seated structural obstacles to development. Some obstacles, such as barriers to international markets and unsustainably high levels of international debt, can be dealt with in cooperation with developed countries. Others, such as those posed by a country's size and location, vulnerability to natural disasters or rampant diseases such as acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) or malaria, can often be best dealt with in cooperation with other developing countries that have experience in dealing with such problems. Similar economic, cultural and data systems in recipient and assisting developing countries often facilitate technology transfer. Costs are invariably lower, especially if there is need for long-term support, as is often the case in dealing with basic structural deficits. An additional benefit is the sense of solidarity inherent in South-South cooperation that can contribute to firm local ownership. Such South-South cooperation, especially with triangular financial support from developed countries, may be one of the most effective ways of building momentum towards the realization of the Millennium Development Goals. South-South cooperation may also be the best route to building the basic capacity in governance and economic, social and legal infrastructure necessary to underpin accelerated development. A United Nations day and/or an international decade would frame and focus the help or offers of assistance from the more advanced developing countries to the less developed. In doing so, it would perforce give South-South cooperation a strategic orientation and thrust.

16. No existing mechanism is capable of mobilizing sufficient support for South-South cooperation in the contexts described above. The Movement of Non-Aligned Countries and the Group of 77 are the main bodies active in promoting South-South cooperation, but their efforts are not yet comprehensive. The General Assembly deals with South-South cooperation mainly through the biennial meetings of its High-level Committee for the Review of Technical Cooperation among Developing

Countries. The Committee receives reports prepared by the Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries of UNDP, its substantive secretariat, on the basis of information gathered from focal points at the national level and with United Nations agencies and programmes, and from keyword searches on the Internet. The reports have indicated the existence of a major information gap in relation to South-South cooperation: most Governments are unaware of existing capacities in the South and the system of focal points needs to be energized. The third main reason for declaring a United Nations day or an international decade is that it would provide an opportunity for various actors to work towards solidifying the information base available to all stakeholders in South-South cooperation and energizing the focal points system.

17. An important consideration in the decision to declare a United Nations day and/or an international decade on South-South cooperation is feasibility. How effective will it be in meeting existing challenges? The answer to that question will depend on the actual performance of Governments and other stakeholders, but there is little doubt that the proposed decade on South-South cooperation would fill the following criteria set out by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council:

(a) It would be consistent with the purposes and principles of the United Nations, and is of priority concern to many Governments;

(b) The issues at hand require long-term action at the international and/or regional and national levels;

(c) A decade is expected to produce results, which would not otherwise be achieved.

18. The criteria outlined above in regard to international decades apply equally to the proposal for a United Nations day for South-South cooperation.

19. The elements of a substantive programme of action containing well-defined objectives and activities laid out in the Millennium Development Goals and the results identified therein would be the subject for increased South-South collaboration. Given the current widespread support for South-South cooperation among developing countries, it should not be difficult to mobilize public support for the activities to be carried out in marking the day and/or the decade.

IV. Marking the United Nations day and/or the international decade for South-South cooperation

20. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action was marked during the thirteenth session of the High-level Committee on the Review of Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries in May 2003. If declared to begin in 2005, the international decade would provide immediate opportunities to initiate the more action-oriented agenda for South-South cooperation called for by the South Summit and the High-level Committee on the Review of Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries at its thirteenth session.

21. The rationale and objectives of the Decade would be to:

(a) Take stock of the state of South-South cooperation, bringing into focus major obstacles, the new and emerging capacities of developing countries, their partnerships and trends affecting South-South cooperation and, on the basis of that stocktaking, to consolidate the agenda for action around the strategic goals of developing countries;

(b) Provide coherent and sustained support for developing countries that need it in order to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

22. The rationale and objective of the proposed day for South-South cooperation would be to:

(a) Provide an annual occasion to publicize South-South cooperation and to highlight trends, as well as specific developments;

(b) Call the attention of policy makers and the broader public to the importance of South-South cooperation and its potential.

23. The annual United Nations day for South-South cooperation could be celebrated on 12 September, the date on which the General Assembly endorsed the Buenos Aires Plan of Action on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries.

V. Activities and outcomes

24. The activities of both the international decade and the United Nations day on South-South cooperation would be centred on building public awareness on South-South cooperation and using the growing capacities in the South to meet internationally agreed development goals through the work of the established network of technical cooperation among developing countries focal points in national Governments. The network has not been sufficiently active over the years, mainly because it has been given few incentives to undertake meaningful tasks. In promoting action-oriented programmes relevant to the United Nations day for South-South cooperation and/or the international decade, in addition to mobilizing financial and other resources the national technical cooperation among developing countries focal points would play a lead role in the carrying out of activities, such as the organization of:

(a) Workshops and discussion forums;

(b) Public lectures and presentations;

(c) Press conferences;

(d) The launching of television documentaries and publications;

(e) Virtual conferences and e-mail campaigns;

(f) The design, implementation and monitoring of collaborative programmes.

25. With regard to the day, the Special Unit for Technical Cooperation for Developing Countries would set the overall annual theme in consultation with the

bureau of the High-level Committee on the Review of Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries.

26. The technical cooperation among developing countries focal points in national Governments would act as coordinators for the day and/or the decade at the national level. The organization of events for either event or for both at the national level and at United Nations Headquarters would engage non-governmental organizations, businesses and educational institutions that would set the agenda on the basis of their priorities.

VI. Monitoring impact

27. The biennial meetings of the High-level Committee on the Review of Technical Cooperation for Developing Countries could monitor progress during the decade on the basis of a report submitted by the Special Unit. The Committee is scheduled to meet next in 2005, the first year of the proposed decade. Its meeting in 2015 would be in the year following the end of the decade and its conclusions would feed into the assessment of the Millennium Development Goals.

28. Progress reports on each United Nations day for South-South cooperation could be coordinated by the Special Unit and submitted to the General Assembly through the High-level Committee and the Economic and Social Council on a biennial basis.

VII. Recommendation

29. **Based on the foregoing review, it is recommended that the General Assembly consider declaring: (a) A United Nations day for South-South cooperation, to be held each year on 12 September, the date on which the General Assembly endorsed the Buenos Aires Plan of Action on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries; and/or (b) an international decade on South-South cooperation, beginning in 2005 and ending in 2015.**

Notes

[1] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries, Buenos Aires, 30 August-12 September 1978* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.78.II.A.11 and corrigendum), chap. I.